New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

Volume XIV, Number 15 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of September 21, 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"A Pin to See the Peepshow"

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

September 18, 1953

Joan Miller Shines in 'Peepshow'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"A Pin to See the Peepshow" is a saucy little title for a harrowing evening of theater. This is a murder story, based on a true case. It is not a mystery, except in that this version insists the evidence favors one of the convicted parties.

Represented as innocent is a girl who indulged in a hasty marriage during the first war, to get away from her family. In time she meets a younger man, falls in love with him, and when he kills her husband, is convicted with him for the crime and hanged.

Juicy Role.

If ever there was an actress' vehicle, this is it. The play traces the woman's career from her earliest flirtations, through her growing sophistications, into her illicit passions, and finally right to the gallows.

Miss Joan Miller of the London theater essays this rangy role, and offers a most remarkable exhibition of dramatics. One has the feeling there is nothing in the theater Miss Miller could not do, and quite easily. She begins as a gay, silly girl, chatty with dreams about the endless beauties of life.

She grows more worldly, sobs wildly when her two men fight over her, and tears passions asunder when her situation looks hopeless. When her lover's frustration leads him to murder, and she is involved, the heights of her excitement are immeasurable.

Off to Gallows.

In the end she has supreme hysterics and then succumbs hideously to the prison doctor's drugs, until she is carried to the gallows.

Miss Miller can shock you out of your seat, and often does. Her fault is in not knowing where to draw the line between portraying emotion touchingly, and simply exercising her endless capacity. Shortly after the play begins, she has so twisted her mouth and her hands, and run her voice through such a scale, that no surprises can possibly follow.

She wrings every ounce of meaning out of lines, until they become ludicrously pompous when they were meant to be very simple. The last big scene is clinically ugly, without in the least arousing pity.

With occasional restraint enough to give her role some interesting shape, and some unexpected sense of crescendo, Miss Miller could very easily make this an unforgettable evening. It seems to me that she has approached a very down to earth, realistic modern play, with enough equipment and verve to play King Lear and all three of his daughters.

Most of the other actors sooner or later fall into the leading player's mistake of overacting out of all semblance or reality, or even the illusion thereof.

Lawyer Shines.

Claude Horton is excellent as the dull husband, until he begins pounding out his desperation at his wife's perfidy. Roger Moore does a successful job as the youthful, handsome, no good lover.

Of the lesser roles, the defense lawyer, as played by Jerome Kilty, is outstanding for the relentless building of an interrogation of the unhappy woman. Frederic Warriner as the prison doctor lends the final sequence dignity.

"A PIN TO SEE THE PEEPSHOW"

Play by F. Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood, based on Miss Jesse's novel; staged by Peter Cotes; setting by Ariel Ballif; lighting by Feder; costumes by Ruth Morley; presented by Nancy Davids at the Playhouse Theatre, September 17, 1953. The cast:

Julia Almond.....Joan Miller
Anne Ackroyd...Martha Farrar
Herbert Starling..Claude Horton
George Almond.....Bill Griffis
Mrs. Almond..Eva Leonard Boyne
Dr. Ackroyd.....Basil Howes
Elsa.....Joy Saunders
Lily Kitt.....Valerie Cardew
Bertha Starling.....
Margaretta Warwick
Marian Lestrange..Marie Paxton
Gipsy Danvers.....
Winnifred Cushing
Captain Embury.....
Frederic Warriner
Leo Carr.....Roger Moore
Police Constable..James Morley
Police Inspector...Ronald Long
Another Constable..Pat Malone
Matron.....Nell Clarke
Mr. Ringwood.....Jerome Kilty
A wardress.....Shirley Gale

The play is done in a series of sectional scenes which give pace to the action, but not as much as you might expect, when so many simultaneous settings are available.

New York Post

September 18, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

About the Murder of a Husband

If you can put up with a slow-starting and decidedly commonplace murder play to watch a stunt performance of considerable magnitude, you may well find "A Pin to See the Peepshow," which opened last night at the Playhouse, a rewarding theatrical evening. I hate to sound so indecisive in the matter, but it all depends on what you are looking for in the drama. Personally, I found Joan Miller's bravura playing of a lady about to be executed for the murder of her husband interesting and impressive, but I'd like to see her in something better.

This is the drama that F. Tennyson Jesse, an English literary expert on homicide, and H. M. Harwood have made out of a novel by Miss Jesse dealing with the celebrated Thompson-Bywater murder case which excited all of Britain some thirty years ago and is still debated by people concerned with possible miscarriages of justice. It is the opinion of the playwrights that the wife was not guilty of participation in her young lover's slaying of her somewhat more mature husband and that she was wrongly hanged as his accomplice.

Madame Bovary

In their view, Mrs. Almond, as they call her, was a sort of English Madame Bovary, a rather stupid and violently romantic woman, married to a dull husband she didn't love and overwhelmed by passion for a young man not quite up to the devotion she lavished on him. It seems that she wrote him some indiscreet letters which he even more indiscreetly kept in his possession, and that they were misinterpreted by the uncomprehending jurymen. Even her attorney was so skeptical that he kept her from testifying for herself.

Although the play does attempt to explain the unfortunate lady by contemplating her excessively romantic temperament, it is chiefly concerned with supplying a field day for an emotional actress. One result is that the narrative appears superficial and preoccupied with the surface details of the poor lady's anguish, rather than a perceptive probing into the quality of her tragedy. I think the effect is that the sight of Mrs. Almond writhing in terror in her death cell is more uncomfortable than it is moving.

It does, however, provide Miss Miller with plenty of opportunities to tear a passion to tatters, and she certainly knows how to take advantage of them. Hers is, I think, rather a mannered performance, but there is no doubt of her power and resource, and when, in the scene next to the last, she screams out a succession of despairing cries of "no!" she is frighteningly effective. Like the play, she is more upsetting than moving, if I may make such a distinction, but I found her constantly interesting to watch, which is more than can be said for the drama.

Although "A Pin to See the Peepshow" is pretty much a one-woman play, there are good performances in the other roles. I particularly recall Jerome Kilty as the slightly skeptical attorney, Roger Moore as the lover, Claude Horton as the husband, Margaretta Warwick as his vindictive sister and Martha Farrar as a loyal friend of the wife. Since I enjoy vigorous emotional acting, I admired Miss Miller's agonized characterization and thought she kept the second half of the play arresting, but I wish it weren't so superficial.

Daily Mirror

September 18, 1953

'Pin to See the Peepshow' Opens at Playhouse

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"A Pin to See the Peepshow," which Nancy Davids brought to the Playhouse Thursday night was penned by F. Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood after a novel of the same name by the former. The book is said to have been based upon an actual murder case in England.

IT POINTED UP once again the difference in British and American tastes. We more often turn thumbs down on London imports than we embrace them, and vice versa. Frequently they don't relish our hits when they are transferred over there. The new arrival is reported to have had a successful subscription run at the New Boltons Club Theatre after the Lord Chamberlain banned it for the West End.

"A Pin to See the Peepshow" has to do with a flighty, restless and ambitious girl who obtains employment in a fashionable dress shop and marries a middle-aged man to escape from her drab home. But life with a man 15 years her senior proves a disappointment, too. So she seeks romance with a merchant marine engineer several years her junior.

The girl's husband is killed. She and her lover are convicted of plotting his death. She goes to the gallows protesting her innocence. We understand the script to imply that she was a victim of fate, trapped by incriminating letters she had written her paramour.

* * *

"A PIN TO SEE the Peepshow" is a sordid, awkward and dull drama. Try as we might, we were never able to generate an ounce of sympathy for its people. Somehow, they resolutely refused to come alive. They were as zombies stalking a stage, though on occasions overly robust zombies.

Pilgrims returning from England have been singing the praises of Joan Miller, who created her current role at the New Boltons. The role of Julia Almond, the girl who fled from one "cage"only to land in another. So we looked forward with high expectancy to seeing this young actress. Frankly, we were disappointed.

She never lets you forget that she's acting. She is given to the broad and obvious stroke. She failed completely to gain our interest for the tragic Julia. In fact, Julia was more absurd than tragic. She was just an irritating bore. In fairness to Miss Miller, we should state that Peter Cotes' direction was of no help at all.

CLAUDE HORTON, of the entire cast, seemed to act with the most genuine feeling as the elderly husband. He had one or two effective scenes. Handicapped by Cotes' megaphoning, Roger Moore, tall, good-looking and restrained, made a favorable impression as the third angle in that triangle that keeps popping up in melodramas and French farces.

Jerome Kilty clicked as a dignified, shrewd barrister in a brief sequence. Martha Farrar, Joy Saunders and Valerie Cardew showed promise for the future.

Journal American

September 18, 1953

Finely Produced Play Just Fails to Come Off

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE difficulties surrounding the cancellation of a superfluous husband are given a very strident airing in something called "A Pin To See The Peepshow," which opened at the Playhouse Theatre last night. Here is a tale from true life, written by that masterly mystery writer, F. Tennyson Jesse, and a collaborator named H. M. Harwood; it is superlatively acted by an accomplished cast and produced with distinction. But it doesn't quite come off.

The problem at hand concerns a young lady who makes a marriage of convenience and then, a few years later, finds herself hopelessly in love with a younger man.

The husband is aware of this but will not let her go and the lover is impatient with the inconvenience of seeing her only at strange hours and in compromising places.

There is a scene between the lovers in which it is made clear that everything would be enhanced by the swift demise of the inconvenient spouse, but the wife wants no part of violence.

Husband Slain

So the husband is slain the next night. He is walking home through the park with his wife when he is suddenly belted over the noggin with a monkey wrench, and who is going to believe it when the lover confesses and the wife claims she had nothing to do with it?

As it turns out, practically nobody. There are some highly incriminating letters, the circumstances that she was about to bear her husband a child she didn't want, and various other complications which result in her final conviction as an accomplice.

As a wardress remarks, in the anguishing moments before she is fitted for the noose, "She got caught up in something stronger than she was."

There is surely nothing trivial about this theme and it all is intelligently written, word for word, but it seemed to me to have been badly assembled. Almost the entire first act is devoted to character delineation and much of it is superfluous; not a great deal would be lost if the show began with the rise of the second curtain.

Joan Excellent

Even so, why does it fail? Perhaps through some inherent conviction that justice doesn't miscarry to this degree, that despite the author's interpretation the wife might not have been entirely without blame.

If she is able to sell her innocence to the audience, why can't she somehow make it stand up in a civilized court of law?

Be that as it may there is no question about the profound accomplishments of Joan Miller, as the wife. She will be remembered for at least two magnificent scenes, the one in which she explains her case to the lawyer and the fierce episode, later, when she is given a hypodermic to prepare for her death.

Ably assisting her in the large cast are Bill Griffis, as the husband; Jerome Kilty, as the lawyer; Roger Moore, as the lover, and a platoon of other estimable actors.

The direction of Peter Cotes seemed effective, but I wish Feder, who did the lighting, had shed a little more light on many of the numerous small scenes.

In fact, somebody might have shed more light over the entire proceedings.

DAILY NEWS

September 18, 1953

Joan Miller Acts & Acts & Acts In 'A Pin to See the Peep Show'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

It may be that truth is duller than fiction, after all. A new play presented last evening at the Playhouse, "A Pin to See the Peep Show," is know to be a stage version of a real London murder case. It should therefore have been fascinating and thrilling for any addict of two-bit whodunits like myself knows that the best crime stories have come from London ever since the days of Conan Doyle and his hop-head hero, Holmes. But "Peep Show" seemed to me last evening to be the most protracted anti-climax since Richard Wagner finally and mercifully allowed Isolde's Tristan to drop dead.

The best part of the new production on 48th St. is the acting of Joan Miller as a woman who is convicted of and hanged for the murder of an unwanted husband. The authors of the play, F. Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood, are inclined to believe that Miss Miller was innocent—and having committed themselves to writing a documentary rather than a drama, they are obliged to send Miss Miler to the gallows in the last scene.

Picks Up at End.

It's a cheerless ending, of course, but it does give Miss Miller an opportunity for some fruity acting and she makes the best of it. The last 20 minutes of "A Pin to See the Peep Show" are good, hokey melodrama, with the condemned woman lying on her cot in a death cell and having a first-rate fit.

But it takes a long time by the clock to get to the last 20 minutes, and the wait may try the patience of all but the most devoted admirers of the British, or slow-burning, type of melodrama. When Miss Miller finally gets wound up and lets go she is interesting and even exciting—but I don't think she can hold a match to the Judith Evelyn who played the horrified heroine in the best of recent English mellers, "Angel Street."

One Good Scene.

There isn't much plot in "A Pin To See The Peep Show." A woman has taken herself a lover because her husband doesn't suit her, and the husband gets killed with a spanner, which is an English, or left-handed, monkey wrench. Wife and lover are convicted of the crime but, the dramatists, Miss Jesse and Mr. Harwood, think that the wife was innocent. She wanted her husband to drop dead, all right—but preferably from natural causes.

The drama is played in 13 scenes, few of which are cumulative. The best of these scenes—counting out the death-cell bit, which is a solo in deliberate hysterics—is one between Miss Miller and Jerome Kilty, a lawyer who has taken up her defense with the idea that he can't possibly win. Mr. Kilty, in his few moments on the stage, manages to inject some force and pace into an otherwise meandering show. I must also commend Ruth Morley for the costumes she has designed to represent the period from 1916 to 1923. They are genuinely artistic horrors—but the play isn't.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

September 18, 1953

THEATER

'A Pin to See the Peepshow'

By WALTER F. KERR

MORE than anything else, "A Pin to See the Peep Show" seems to be intended as a sort of spectacular showcase for an actress. Based on a famous British murder case of some thirty years back, it offers its leading lady a chance to bounce around breathlessly as a kittenish school-girl, to snarl sullenly at the pedestrian gent she has married, to nestle on a chaise-longue with a young collar-ad she has picked up, to tremble violently when her husband is found with a hole in his head, and finally to claw feverishly at the sheets of a prison cot shortly before she is executed. I guess you would call the whole thing a gamut.

Joan Miller is playing the part in the new F. Tennyson Jesse-H. M. Harwood operation at the Playhouse, and Miss Miller is reported to have had quite a success with it in one of London's experimental theaters. At the moment, it is difficult to see how.

* * *

The actress comes to us with an arsenal of technical equipment. She scrunches up coyly on a park bench. She dances daintily as she admires herself in a mirror. She slashes make-up on herself as she snarls moodily at her husband. She shuts her eyes, adopts a smoky voice, and murmurs langorously of suicide to her lover. She coos, pouts, whines, and whispers.

In time she takes to singing. Quite a few of the evening's later lines float out over the audience in a sustained and sighing tremolo, as though they had been written "That's - all - the - time - we - ever - had - together!" (Sob)

But for all the performer's admitted dexterity, the results are cold, measured, and distressingly mechanical. And for all the detail the authors have dredged up by way of explaining their character, the girl remains impenetrable.

* * *

The authors have been nothing if not conscientious. As background, they have introduced us to the heroine's entire family, to her childhood friends, to her first employers, to practically every one she ever nodded to in passing through St. Clement's Square. As a result, we are four long scenes getting around to her unfortunate marriage, and a good eight getting around to the murder which is, presumably, our principal interest. As melodrama, "A Pin to See the Peep Show" adds up to a kind of Family Album of people you never wanted to meet in the first place.

Some of the minor performances are even more perplexing than Miss Miller's. There is, for instance, a modiste surrounded by a hobble skirt, an elongated cigarette-holder, and a beaded bag—the time is 1916—who wants to make it very clear that she is a world-weary sophisticate. To accomplish this, the actress splits each word into two distinct syllables, letting the first ascend on a puff of smoke and the second drop to the floor with a throaty thud. The effect is both studied and stupefying. Elsewhere there is simply a barrage of laborious British accents.

Honorable exception must be made for Jerome Kilty as a mercifully tart barrister; Frederic Warriner as a calm prison doctor with a measure of common sense; and Margaretta Warwick as a testy and domineering spinster.

Peter Cotes seems to have directed the play on the principle that if you've got a bench, the obvious thing to do with it is to have everybody sit on it for as long as the scene lasts. There is something sound, sensible, and businesslike about this, and something very, very dull. Such eruptions as occur are not much better, and it is characteristic of the production that when some characters take to holding other characters back from attacking still other characters, the ones who are doing the holding don't seem able for the job and the ones who are doing the attacking don't seem much interested.

Perhaps the authors based their play on the original court records. It would be strange to think that some one had invented so much that is irrelevant.

The New York Times

September 18, 1953

'A Pin to See the Peepshow' Is the Character Study of a Reckless Lady

By BROOKS ATKINSON

F. Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood have written a murder drama scrupulously. That speaks well for their ethics but it leaves the theatregoer with a tepid play. "A Pin to See the Peepshow" is the title of their drama, which was conscientiously acted at The Playhouse last evening. It is the woman's side of the Thompson-Bywaters murder that edified the British public thirty years ago.

Possibly the authors might resent the implication that "A Pin to See the Peepshow" is a murder play. In tedious detail it chronicles the misadventures of a highly romantic lady who never intended anyone any harm. The authors have gone to endless trouble to write a character study instead of a melodrama.

* * *

In 1916 Julia Almond is a silly girl looking for a rosy life and romantic excitement. Seven years later she is being dragged off to the gallows by some very well-bred and solemn men. During the years between Julia marries a chump whom she does not love, and then falls recklessly in love with a young ship's engineer who fatally bops her husband on the conk with a wrench.

Miss Jesse and Mr. Harwood have recorded every step in Julia's last seven years as if they were studying the case from a scientific point of view. Unfortunately, Julia's life seems to be platitudinous. Whether or not she is morally innocent is not a matter of much dramatic consequence. For Julia is a selfish egotist, her lover is a bounder, her husband a bore and her family thoroughly colorless. In the theatre, which is an iniquitous place, it is easier to get interested in vicious people.

* * *

"A Pin to See the Peepshow" has been meticulously staged by Peter Cotes. There is nothing racy or distasteful in the whole sordid yarn. Since the play is written in thirteen scenes, Ariel Ballif has had to design a fluid scenic production. As lighted by Abe Feder, it is immaculate and admirable. It is as antiseptic as a laboratory.

In the long part of Julia Almond, the Madame Bovary of London, Joan Miller gives a flawless performance that becomes powerful in the last two or three scenes. When the law catches up with Julia and she goes on trial for her life, Miss Miller has something to act. She takes full advantage of it in a forceful, harrowing performance.

Since the authors of the play have not omitted any details, the cast is a long one. There are twenty speaking parts, in addition to seven "prison officials and others." Every performance is blameless. Every actor competently contributes his bit with credit to his training and upbringing. A stupid husband gets murdered, but there is nothing unmannerly in the performance—ladies and gentlemen all. That may be one reason why "A Pin to See the Peepshow" never comes to life on the stage until the last fifteen or twenty minutes of a genteel evening.

"A Red Rainbow"

The New York Times

September 15, 1953

Myron Fagan's 'A Red Rainbow' Is a Murder Melodrama About a Master Spy

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Myron C. Fagan, who has not been operating in this neighborhood since 1931, has returned with "A Red Rainbow," which opened at the Royale last evening. He has not improved his craftsmanship much. His current exhibit is a melodrama about "Mr. Moscow" in America who is helping to mastermind the world revolution and has to be murdered in the last act by a patriotic American. In a bulletin to the theatregoer, printed in the program, Mr. Fagan modestly remarks: "This play was written at the suggestion of high Washington officials in 1946. They provided me with documentary evidence covering all the statements made in this play."

* * *

Since 1946, a lot of high Washington officials have been returned to the farm to rest and improve their minds. In any case, Mr. Fagan does not claim that they suggested he write "A Red Rainbow" in its present form. Most of it is a prolonged cross-questioning of murder suspects by a bullying police inspector in New York. Except in the hands of an expert, cross-questioning is the most tedious way of telling a murder story. Mr. Fagan is no expert in the craft.

Collecting a group of odious people from journalism, the stage and Washington, he sets them to blackmailing each other in some very complicated exchanges of insults and gutter humor. To Mr. Fagan the progress of his investigation into murder may be absolutely clear. Theatregoers, less intimately acquainted with the background, may find themselves bewildered by the clues and certain of nothing except the dullness of the characters and the hackneyed cheapness of the lives they lead.

* * *

In the last act, Mr. Fagan has things better in hand. Through the early parts of the play his characters have been declaring that Harry Hopkins gave the atom bomb to Russia, that Alger Hiss was the architect of the United Nations and that the disaster of Pearl Harbor was planned in Washington. By eavesdropping on the dialogue of his own characters, Mr. Fagan traces the direct line of spies, traitors and saboteurs back to the Black Tom explosion.

After Mr. Fagan has unmasked his master Communist in a Park Avenue penthouse in the last act the play settles down to some fascinating stuff. The master Communist and his chief opponent—a Broadway producer, no less—argue the future back and forth with considerable scorn and asperity. When the argument seems to be going against American interests the producer shoots the fatal shot; and since he has seen a lot of bad detective plays in the performance of professional duty he arranges his escape ingeniously. You may be sure that when the mystery is solved Inspector Scanlon, chief of homicide, heartily praises the patriotism of the murderer.

* * *

Crudely written, "A Red Rainbow" is crudely acted under the author's personal direction. As the police inspector, Howard Smith chews on a cigar, pokes his finger into the faces of witnesses and barks at them savagely. As the master Communist spy, Robert Middleton emits a series of hacking laughs in the style of old-fashioned drama, for no actor can really distinguish himself in a play as badly written as "A Red Rainbow."

"A RED RAINBOW"

Play written and staged by Myron C. Fagan; setting by Louis Kennel; presented by Bruce Fagan at the Royale Theatre, September 14, 1953. The cast:

Inspector Scanlan . . Howard Smith
Boris Sarno . . Hans Josef Schumm
District Attorney Britt . . . . . Winston Ross
Gorman . . . . . William Martel
Roxy Gainsborough . . Effie Afton
Major Robert Brainard . . . . . William Kemp
Arline Mason . . Mary Alice Moore
Jensen . . . . . William Remick
Sen. Derlin . . Fred Irving Lewis
Mrs. Russell Meadow . . . . . Ruthelma Stevens
J. Kerrigan Kane . . . . . Robert Middleton
Congressman Felz . . . . . Spencer James
Rourke . . . . . William Adler

To judge by his solemn program note, Mr. Fagan believes that he is helping to save America. That leaves us with an unworthy thought: Who is going to save America from Mr. Fagan?

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 15, 1953

'Red Rainbow' Spins Tale of Treachery

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Most of the wildest rumors of high echelon wartime treachery are dug out and flashed around in "A Red Rainbow." They made much more stimulating argument in their day than they make good theater now.

The title of this melodrama refers to a legend about a rainbow seen in the sky at the birth of Genghis Khan. One of the play's characters describes seeing it again at historic secret meeting in New York in 1907, when Lenin inaugurated the Communist party in America.

This description is typical of the semblance of literalness that colors the play. It strikes one note of genuine thriller excitement in probing the responsibility for the Black Tom Explosion of the first World War. But the rest of its attempts to create an air of factual accuracy border on the outlandish.

Superficial Evil.

The chief reason for this must be the inept making of the play itself. It is rich with the tritest kind of situation and expression. Even if you were rabidly anxious to accept its warnings of insidious betrayals of high government trusts, the dramatic presentation of this evil is too superficial for it to impress.

The play is constructed in a series of flashbacks, some springing from a character's recapitulation of what previously took place. Others ignore consistency for the convenience of the narration.

A powerful columnist has been murdered, and a ridiculous police inspector irritates the witnesses until they begin to tell him bits and pieces of what really happened.

Man of Many Faces.

The columnist is gradually revealed as a suave, well-mannered host, a man genuinely in love with an actress, an unprincipled and resourceful blackmailer, the man who installed Hitler's spies in the U.S. government, and the head of the Communist party in America.

The object of his affections is a theatrical star, married to a war hero who is also a prominent member of Congress. Her producer not only turns out to be closely related to her, but also changes in a twinkling from a dark villain to a shining hero.

The quantity of plot is immeasurable. The actors do not often clarify the tangle of narrative. Most of them seem to have been rigidly trained in a television technique, which assumes that you need never face an audience or raise your voice.

Only two actors defy this method with any great success. Howard Smith, harassed with meandering bombastic lines, talks loudly and clearly. Effie Afton tosses out her somewhat shabby wisecracks with a generous delivery.

"A Red Rainbow" was sincerely intended to combat indifference. Having lost its head, it is a recommendation for "pure entertainment" in the theater.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

September 15, 1953

THEATER

'A Red Rainbow'

By WALTER F. KERR

I SHALL do my best this morning to explain a play called "A Red Rainbow" which opened at the Royale last night. The "Red" in the title stands for Communism. The "Rainbow" stands for the light in the heavens on the day Communism takes over. The audience stands for more than can possibly be imagined.

The moral of the piece, so far as I was able to grasp it, seems to be: if you happen to know a subversive personally, shoot him dead. At least that's the novel and presumably sympathetic conclusion toward which author Myron C. Fagan drives his characters.

Toward the end of the evening an outraged American is waving a gun at a decidedly disloyal newspaper columnist. "There is only one sure law for you," he screams as he plugs the enemy in a penthouse apartment, "the law of the dead dog. What I do here tonight some brave Frenchman will do in France, some Swede will do in Sweden," and so on. As the curtain falls, a hearty Homicide Inspector is clapping this high-minded hero on the shoulder and announcing something to the effect that "This man will be tried for the crime of saving America!"

Quite apart from the curious ethics which are urged upon us all, "A Red Rainbow" is a fascinating exercise in simple-mindedness on several other counts. To begin with, the play—the use of the word 'play' is the last flattery I shall indulge in today—is extremely complicated.

Its first act is a sort of mystery melodrama (Who killed columnist J. Kerrigan Kane?) in which all of the suspects twitch nervously and in which the police force goes in for lingo like "Tell the chief that Roxy dame is ready to squeal." It has a certain amount of humor, too. When that Roxy dame is finally interrogated as to her whereabouts at the time of the shooting, she replies, "Okay, wise guy, I'll tell you what I was doin'. Knittin' a mitten for my kitten." I could quote you better samples, but they wouldn't do for breakfast.

The second act takes us back—it took me back, anyway—to the actual murder. This is where the politics come in. Quite a few Washington higer-ups are on hand for a cocktail party given by this despicable columnist, and they are all furiously in the know. Among the things they profess to know are: the "true" story behind Pearl Harbor; the fact that Alger Hiss was the "architect of the United Nations"; the fact that top scientists on the Atomic Energy Commission are busy passing all available information to Russia. There is also the suggestion that the ultimate Communist coup here will come through the labor unions, and the alarmingly explicit announcement—the actors spoke very rapidly here, but I think I got it right—that Harry Hopkins had personally turned the atom bomb over to Russia.

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In the third act it turns out that our columnist friend—syndicated, of course—not only has sufficient Senators in his employ to stifle an anti-subversive bill, but that he is the man who, at the time of the Hitler-Stalin pact, placed key Communists at the top of each of our government agencies. In fact, you still haven't got the picture. He was also the man who pulled the switches for the Black Tom explosion during World War I. What I want to know is where was he when McKinley was shot?

It is customary on occasions like this to say that the actors were valiant. I think they were out of their heads. Veteran Howard Smith, as the police chief, bellows his way through the somnambulistic proceedings, thrusting his several chins out at each suspect in turn. The rest of the company seem to be having trouble remembering the lines. Unfortunately, they remember quite a few of them.

New York Post

September 15, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Something Called 'A Red Rainbow'

It is difficult for anyone, save Myron C. Fagan, to take Mr. Fagan seriously as a playwright. In his time, he has written some pretty terrible plays, but he has never been clumsier, more inept, more tasteless or more scurrilous than he is in his melodrama called "A Red Rainbow," which opened last night at the Royale Theater. It is such a hopelessly incompetent work that it might be dismissed as just another of those little disasters that turn up occasionally to the embarrassment of everybody concerned, and are quickly and mercifully forgotten.

But this time Mr. Fagan is not merely the teller of a bad melodrama, with inane comedy lines. He is also an angry editorialist, who is very much in earnest about his editorial, and there is so little earnestness in current playwriting that a dramatist who really feels something deeply tempts one to take him seriously, for all his lack of talent. But the author of "A Red Rainbow" makes the task of giving him a sympathetic hearing impossible by not only the dreadfulness of his dramaturgy but also the nastiness of his screaming.

The Hatred

Since it represents his point of view, it might be possible to bear with a show of patience his hatred of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, his sneers at Mrs. Roosevelt, and his dark hint that disapproval of the Taft-Hartley Act is somehow synonymous with Red treason. But when we find him charging, through the mouth of one of his chief protagonists, that the atom bomb was given to Russia by "Harry Hopkins and other traitors," he is getting considerably out of bounds. And my quotation is directly from his dialogue.

What Mr. Fagan has done is to give us, under the guise of patriotic anti-Communism, a violent and hysterical attack on the New Deal and all its works. He can say, "Even General Marshall had to admit" and make it sound a sinister suggestion, and it is his conviction that Alger Hiss was responsible for virtually everything President Roosevelt ever did. Of course, the State Department comes in for his particular abuse. Indeed, "A Red Rainbow" is so busy denouncing the Democrats in Washington that it seems about to forget Russia.

Dead Columnist

It all begins quietly enough with the Chief of the Homicide Squad trying to find out who had killed a powerful columnist. After a dull act devoted to the questioning of suspects, it develops that the columnist had been a Nazi. But don't think Mr. Fagan is neglecting the Russians. In the end, we find out that the fellow was really a Red, that he had been with Lenin in 1907 when he plotted to seize the world by subverting it, and that the Communists were responsible for not only Hitler but even Pearl Harbor and the Black Tom explosion during the earlier World War.

One thing that Mr. Fagan makes clear is that patriotism can also be the last refuge of the bad playwright. The author of "A Red Rainbow" is certainly inept at writing a drama, but he is equally unskillful as a propagandist. He doesn't know how to handle dialogue or manage comedy or write melodrama so as to make it exciting, and his attacks are so hysterical and wholesale that he destroys conviction. It is certainly a sign that the theater is in a bad way when good actors have to accept jobs in such trash. Most of them seemed embarrassed.

Daily Mirror

September 15, 1953

'A Red Rainbow' Opens At the Royale

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Bruce Fagan brought "A Red Rainbow" to the Royale Theatre Monday evening, and, believe us, there's no pot of gold at the end of it. Written by Bruce's father, Myron C. Fagan, it is an expose of naziism and communism masquerading as a murder mystery. Now don't get us wrong. We are bitterly opposed to both of those "isms," but tracts posing as plays aren't going to do much to squelch them.

There is a murder all right. A sinister columnist and syndicate owner is found dead in his apartment. A determined police inspector tries to find the culprit, though he is warned that so many important people are involved that he had better report it as a suicide. But this honest minion of the law isn't one to be impressed by threats.

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HE ROUNDS UP a flock of the columnist's peculiar friends and has them re-enact their last meetings with the deceased. It turns out that all had motives for abolishing the monster who had been blackmailing them to protect Nazi and Communist spy rings in this country.

To pen you a synopsis of the rest of the involved plot would prove much too taxing for even this dedicated first-nighter. But just to give you a little idea, we'll cite one case history. There's an actress, married to a patriotic legislator, who has a manager who proves to be her own father who years before had been framed by the Columnist, who is now his chief theatrical backer—Confused enough?

A program note states: "This play was written at the suggestion of high Washington officials in 1946. They provided me with documentary evidence covering all the statements made in this play.—Myron C. Fagan." A number of famous names are tossed around during the proceedings at the Royale, with the implication that they betrayed this nation. One is Alger Hiss. We cannot mention the others without advice of counsel.

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FROM THE FOREGOING, you may sense that this is a provocative play. It is also a pedestrian play. A tedious play. It is not an especially lengthy one, but it gave at least one aisle-sitter the illusion that he had been occupying his chair for a dullish weekend. If we suffered more than a little, we kept wondering how the valiant actors on stage were feeling.

If they shared our boredom, they didn't show it. Howard Smith, Hans Josef Schumm, Winston Ross, William Martel, Effie Afton, William Kemp, Mary Alice Moore, William Remick, Fred Irving Lewis, Ruthelma Stevens, Robert Middleton, Spencer James and William Adler merit medals for courage under fire. They seldom flinched in the face of disaster.

In justice to author-director Fagan, we should state that he seemed to be earnest in seeking to expose treachery in high places. But we think he would have been wiser to submit his accusations to the McCarthy and Velde committees. They have been constituted by our Congress to handle such matters.

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THE THEATRE should not, in our opinion, be a soap-box. It should not offer laborious and contrived diatribes for or against anything. It should be an art. By that we do not mean that skilled craftsmen should not handle ideas. For we honor Ibsen and Shaw. But, unfortunately, Fagan is not an Ibsen or a Shaw.